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**In the Aftermath of Unfair Events:  
Understanding the Differential Effects of Anxiety and Anger**

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### ABSTRACT

After decades of domination by social exchange theory and its focus on a manager-centered perspective, fairness scholars have recently issued numerous calls to shift attention towards understanding employees' subjective "lived through" experiences and *in situ* responses to unfair events. Using appraisal theories, we argue that focusing on the employee's perspective highlights the importance of emotions in fairness experiences. Further, this emphasis creates opportunities for novel insights regarding the emotions that are likely to be relevant, the constructive responses that can emerge from unfairness, and the interplay between unfair events and entity fairness judgments. Using a daily diary study with event sampling, we highlight the importance of anger and anxiety in understanding how individuals experience and react to unfair events. Results indicated that anger elicited counterproductive work behaviors whereas anxiety initiated problem prevention behaviors (i.e., a sub-dimension of proactive work behavior). Further, by engaging in problem prevention behaviors, employees can positively influence their subsequent overall fairness judgments. Experiences of an unfair event can also be shaped by individuals' pre-existing overall fairness judgments, such that pre-existing overall fairness judgments are negatively associated with anger but positively associated with anxiety. Implications for theory and practice are discussed, including the influential role of emotions for fairness experiences, how employees' own behaviors can influence subsequent overall fairness judgments, the interplay between unfair events and entity judgments, and ensuring that fairness is effectively managed on a daily basis.

**Keywords:** fairness, justice, anxiety, anger, counterproductive work behaviors, problem prevention behaviors, proactive behaviors, diary study

**IN THE AFTERMATH OF UNFAIR EVENTS:  
UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENTIAL EFFECTS OF ANXIETY AND ANGER**

*Nothing diminishes anxiety faster than action ~ Walter Anderson*

*The world needs anger. The world often continues to allow evil because it isn't  
angry enough ~ Bede Jarrett*

Fairness is a fundamental concern for individuals and organizations. Given the plethora of outcomes that are predicted by fairness (cf. Colquitt et al., 2013; Rupp, Shao, Jones, & Liao, 2014), scholars and practitioners have shared a strong interest in understanding fairness and, in particular, how individuals respond to unfair events. Studies within this domain have often emphasized a social exchange perspective, which focuses on how individuals reciprocate treatment (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2013; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). However, scholars have recently questioned the utility of this broad conceptual framework, suggesting that its ability to describe “almost any reasonable pattern of findings” comes at the cost of specificity (cf. Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, & Hall, 2017: 2). Within the fairness literature, social exchange perspectives have also been associated with viewing fairness through a manager-centered lens which focuses on the interests and outcomes of relevance to the organization, whereas less attention is focused on employees’ emotional experiences and outcomes of relevance to them (Barclay & Skarlicki, 2008; Bies & Tripp, 2002; Cropanzano et al., 2017).

However, scholars have recently argued that the literature can further deepen its insights by highlighting what it means to *experience* unfairness – that is, shifting emphasis towards employees and exploring individuals’ subjective “lived through” experiences and *in situ* responses to unfair events (e.g., Guo, Rupp, Weiss, & Trougakos, 2011; Rupp, 2011; Shapiro, 2001; Weiss & Rupp, 2011). Building on this foundation, we argue that emphasizing the perspective of employees can highlight appraisal processes, including the discrete negative

emotions (e.g., anger and anxiety) and behaviors that individuals can use to navigate the unfair event. By emphasizing an employee perspective, this approach also expands the focus to include discrete negative emotions that have received relatively little attention in the fairness literature (e.g., anxiety) and positive outcomes (e.g., problem prevention behaviors) that can emerge from unfair events. Further, this creates the opportunity to explore the implications of engaging in these behaviors for the individual (e.g., how behaviors may impact subsequent overall fairness judgments). Thus, by grounding our investigations in the employee's perspective, we can enhance our understanding of the experience of unfairness, raise important theoretical questions, and reveal as well as challenge assumptions that underlie the field. Practically, this can ensure that the literature can compellingly speak to those faced with fairness issues (cf. Shapiro, 2001).

Our general argument is that appraisal theories can highlight processes underlying how individuals experience and react to unfair events on a daily basis. To capture unfair events as they occur in everyday working life, we use a daily diary study with event sampling. We propose that experiencing an unfair event can initiate appraisal processes in which individuals assess the event and its relevance to them. These processes are associated with emotional reactions (e.g., anger and anxiety), which can initiate behaviors that help the individual navigate the situation. Further, we argue that it is important to examine the interplay between unfair events and entity judgments. Specifically, we propose that pre-existing overall fairness judgments can shape how individuals emotionally respond to an unfair event. Additionally, responses to an unfair event may also influence subsequent overall fairness judgments. Figure 1 displays our model.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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Our research aims to make three theoretical contributions to our understanding of how employees experience and respond to fairness events. First, although experiencing unfairness is

inherently emotional (e.g., Mikula, 1986), the role of discrete negative emotions has been underemphasized within the field of organizational justice (cf. Barclay & Kiefer, 2014; Bies & Tripp, 2002; Breugelmans & De Cremer, 2007; Weiss, Suckow, & Cropanzano, 1999). When negative emotions are examined, it is typically as generalized affect (e.g., Barsky & Kaplan, 2007) or as a general category of negative emotions (e.g., Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001; Spector & Fox, 2005), which can gloss over or omit key distinctions between discrete negative emotions. Further, when discrete negative emotions are examined, the focus has been on negative emotions (e.g., anger) that can predict organizationally-relevant outcomes (e.g., counterproductive work behaviors; e.g., Barclay, Skarlicki, & Pugh, 2005; Weiss et al., 1999). However, there have been recent calls to focus on further examining the impact of different discrete emotions. For example, Cropanzano et al. (2017: 24) specifically called for research that not only examines the differential effects of discrete negative emotions but also demonstrates that not all negative emotions predict the same (negative) outcomes, stating that “only certain negative emotions (and not others) predict counterproductive work behaviors.” We highlight the central role of discrete negative emotions and expand our focus beyond anger to include anxiety. Further, we leverage theoretical differences between these discrete emotions to demonstrate their differential effects on behavioral outcomes. In doing so, we respond to calls in the literature to further understand the role of discrete emotions in the context of fairness and to move beyond emotions that focus on predicting counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., Barsky & Kaplan, 2007; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Cropanzano, Stein, & Nadisic, 2011; Hillebrandt & Barclay, 2013).

Second, we provide insight into the roles and influence of behaviors in the aftermath of unfair events. Specifically, we challenge the dominant notions that individuals should be more inclined to reciprocate negative treatment with negative outcomes and that functional behaviors

are unlikely to occur in the aftermath of unfairness (cf. Cropanzano et al., 2017; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). By grounding our investigation in the employee's perspective and appraisal theories, we highlight how seemingly negative behaviors (e.g., counterproductive work behaviors) may have functional consequences for individuals and demonstrate the importance of proactive work behaviors (in particular, problem prevention behaviors) as a constructive response to an unfair event. Although problem prevention behaviors have received relatively little attention in the fairness literature (for an exception, see Fischer & Smith, 2006), our focus on employees' experiences and, in particular, on anxiety highlights how these behaviors can be elicited in the aftermath of an unfair event. Thus, we propose that problem prevention behaviors can emerge in the aftermath of *unfairness* thereby challenging a key assumption in the literature.

Third, although studies have explored both unfair events and entity judgments of fairness (i.e., general appraisals of a target that cross specific situations and time), they are often examined in isolation and their interplay is not well understood (cf. Cropanzano et al., 2001). However, there are indications that individuals do not encounter events with a "blank slate" and that existing entity judgments can influence reactions to unfair events (e.g., Choi, 2008; Jones & Skarlicki, 2013). Further, a common assumption within the literature is that experiencing unfair events can influence entity judgments. However, the process through which this occurs remains unclear. We argue that insights related to these questions can be gained by examining unfair events *in situ* and within the context of ongoing relationships. Drawing upon appraisal theories, we argue that individuals' pre-existing overall fairness judgments can differentially impact how individuals' emotionally experience an unfair event (e.g., enhancing anxiety and diminishing anger). Further, we propose that individuals' subsequent overall fairness judgments (i.e., entity judgments) can be influenced by how they respond to an unfair event. Examining the interplay

between unfair events and subsequent entity perceptions is important because this can enhance our understanding of the relationship between unfair events and entity perceptions, which may also have implications for how these experiences can be effectively managed.

Taken together, our overall goal is to focus on how individuals experience and respond to unfair events *in situ* and from an employee's perspective. Drawing upon appraisal theories, we examine the influence of anger and anxiety as well as the differential behaviors that are likely to be elicited by these emotions (e.g., counterproductive and problem prevention behaviors, respectively). Further, we explore how individuals' emotional reactions to an unfair event can be shaped by pre-existing overall fairness judgments and how their behavioral reactions can also influence subsequent overall fairness judgments. In doing so, we highlight how appraisal theories can enhance our understanding of how individuals experience and respond to fairness issues.

### **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Decades of research has established that most people have a strong desire for fairness and believe that they should be fairly treated (e.g., Lerner, 1981). Fairness is important in its own regard because it fulfills psychological needs (e.g., belonging, control, positive self-regard; Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001). However, fairness can also serve broader goals – for example, fairness has been conceptualized as the “glue” that facilitates effective work relationships (Cropanzano, Bowen, & Gilliland, 2007: 34) and “defines the very essence” of one's relationship with an employer (Rupp, Shapiro, Folger, Skarlicki, & Shao, 2017). Further, not only can individuals strive for fairness, scholars have argued that fairness should be conceptualized as a motivated phenomenon in which fairness can also stimulate cognitions and emotions that can guide behavior (cf. Cropanzano et al., 2001).

Given that appraisal theories focus on assessing an event and its relevance for one's goals



(Lazarus, 1991), we argue that appraisal theories can shed light on how individuals make goal-related assessments and how these appraisals are associated with emotions and behaviors. As Lazarus (1991: 92) noted: emotions are “first and foremost a reaction to the fate of active goals” and individuals can experience discrete emotions as they determine the meaning and implications of the event. For example, when goals are perceived as being hindered, individuals are likely to experience discrete negative emotions (e.g., anger and anxiety), which can elicit different behaviors given theoretical differences in their action tendencies.

We begin our analysis by examining two discrete negative emotions – anger and anxiety. Whereas anger is often examined within the fairness literature because it is related to negative consequences for the organization (e.g., Barclay et al., 2005), anxiety has received less scholarly attention as a reaction to unfair events. However, from an employee’s perspective, unfair events can be stressful experiences that can elicit anxiety (e.g., Vermunt & Steensma, 2001). Anxiety is theoretically important because its’ core theme is very different from anger. Further, its action tendencies go beyond counterproductive work behaviors to include other potentially beneficial behavioral outcomes that are critical for employees but have received little attention in the literature (cf. Cropanzano et al., 2017). By focusing on appraisal processes, we highlight how individuals assess and respond to unfair events, with an emphasis on the influence of discrete emotions and behaviors within these processes.

### **Appraising the Unfair Event: Anger and Anxiety as Emotional Reactions**

When individuals experience fairness-related events (i.e., situations in which an external agent impacts one’s goals; cf. Barsky, Kaplan, & Beal, 2011), they can engage in a primary and secondary appraisal process (Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1990). Primary appraisal focuses on the relevance of the event to the goals of the individual and the valence of the event (positive or

negative; Lazarus, 1991). When an unfair event is experienced, appraisal theories suggest that the event must have goal relevance to activate emotions. As Lazarus (1991: 150) indicates “if there is no goal relevance, there cannot be an emotion.” Thus, an unfair event must be perceived as self-relevant for individuals to engage in further processing. Importantly, the positive versus negative valence of the event narrows the focus to positive or negative emotions. If the event is inconsistent with what the person wants (e.g., to be treated fairly), then it is considered to be goal incongruent. This can activate negative emotions, although the specific discrete negative emotion depends on secondary appraisal. Thus, negative emotions are likely to be activated by events that are negative (i.e., events with negative valence in which progress towards one’s goals is being hindered) and that are important to the individual (i.e., have goal relevance) because these conditions indicate that a goal the individual cares about and is motivated to achieve may be in jeopardy. Taken together, although some events may be deemed unfair, they may not initiate emotions and/or actions if they are not directly relevant to the individual; that is, if they do not make the individual feel that an important goal is being hindered (Barsky et al., 2011).

Whereas primary appraisals (i.e., assessments of valence and importance) generate an initial but fairly undifferentiated emotional reaction, secondary appraisals focus on assessing the event’s meaning and implications which can elicit more specific emotional reactions (i.e., discrete emotions; e.g., Lazarus, 1991; Frijda, 1993). For example, anger and anxiety are both experienced when one’s attempts to achieve a goal have been hindered. However, these emotions reflect different underlying appraisals. Anger occurs when a person blames another for causing a negative event (e.g., an injustice; Lazarus, 1991) and believes that the other person should have behaved differently (Tavris, 1982). That is, anger arises when the individual feels that a goal is being hindered and that someone else is to blame (Lazarus, 1991). Anxiety also reflects goal-

incongruence but it typically arises when an unfair event is perceived as an existential threat thereby creating ambiguity or uncertainty and leaving the individual concerned about potential future harm (Lazarus, 1991).

We argue that an unfair event that is appraised as relevant to the self can signal that progress to one's goal of being fairly treated may be in jeopardy. As individuals engage in secondary appraisal to understand the implications of this goal hindrance, they can experience discrete negative emotions, which can help them navigate the situation (e.g., via behavioral responses). Thus, appraising an unfair event as self-relevant can signal that a goal may be in jeopardy, which can be associated with discrete negative emotions (e.g., anger and anxiety).

*H1: Self-relevant event appraisals of an unfair event are positively related to anger (H1a) and anxiety (H1b).*

### **Pre-Existing Overall Fairness Judgments and the Experience of an Unfair Event**

Given that unfair events often occur within the context of ongoing relationships, we argue that individuals' pre-existing fairness judgments can influence how they emotionally experience an unfair event. Stated differently, pre-existing overall fairness judgments can provide information that can be used in appraisal processes thereby influencing the degree to which anger and anxiety are experienced in response to an unfair event.<sup>1</sup> When individuals feel fairly treated, they have a positive evaluation of the entity responsible for their treatment. We argue that this can impact how individuals emotionally react to an unfair event, such that pre-existing overall fairness judgments can diminish anger and enhance anxiety. Given that anger is related to blaming someone else for an unfair event (Lazarus, 1991; Tavris, 1982), individuals who hold positive evaluations may be more likely to give the benefit of the doubt (i.e., less likely to blame the entity), which can make the event seem less threatening (i.e., diminish anger). With respect to anxiety, this emotion arises in response to ambiguity or uncertainty (Lazarus, 1991). We argue

that individuals are more likely to experience anxiety in response to an unfair event to the degree that their pre-existing overall fairness judgment was positive. This is because the incongruence between the pre-existing evaluation (i.e., pre-existing overall fairness judgment) and the actual treatment (unfair event) can create uncertainty about the future (e.g., leave the individual questioning the relationship or the appropriateness of their positive expectations in light of the unfair event) thereby enhancing anxiety.

*H2: Pre-existing overall fairness judgments are negatively associated with anger (H2a) and positively associated with anxiety (H2b) in the wake of an unfair event.*

### **Understanding the Disparate Behavioral Reactions Elicited by Anger and Anxiety**

Negative emotions signal the presence of a goal blockage (or lack of progress), which directs individuals to focus on achieving the focal goal through their behaviors (Lazarus, 1991). In other words, experiencing goal-incongruent negative emotions (e.g., anger and anxiety) prompts individuals to engage in behaviors that facilitate goal fulfillment. However, anger and anxiety should differentially predict behavioral outcomes due to distinctions in their functions.

Anger is experienced when individuals blame someone else for a negative event and believe this other person should have behaved differently (Tavris, 1982). Previous research has demonstrated that anger can have a fueling influence that can initiate approach-related behaviors aimed at making changes (Lazarus, 1991). For example, anger can instigate counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs; i.e., intentional behaviors that harm or intend to harm an organization and/or its members; cf. Spector & Fox, 2005) because these behaviors signal one's dissatisfaction and that the harmful behavior will not be tolerated (Allred, 1999; Averill, 1982; Tavris, 1982). These behaviors are a common reaction to injustice that are often used to "balance the scales" (e.g., Barclay, Skarlicki, & Pugh, 2005; Ferris, Spence, Brown, & Heller, 2012). Thus, consistent with previous studies, we propose that anger can initiate counterproductive

work behaviors because these behaviors signal dissatisfaction with one's treatment and that unfairness will not be tolerated (Allred, 1999; Tripp & Bies, 1997).

*H3: Anger is positively associated with counterproductive work behaviors.*

By contrast, anxiety typically occurs when the individual experiences ambiguity or uncertainty and is motivated to prevent future harm (Lazarus, 1991). One way to manage this emotion is to engage in concrete actions toward the source of the harm (i.e., the unfair event). Indeed, empirical evidence indicates that rather than continuing to experience uncertainty, people find it more reassuring to take some sort of action, even if there is little that can be done (Gal & Lazarus, 1975). Extending this reasoning, we argue that anxiety can initiate behaviors that reestablish a sense of control, address the problem, and/or prevent future issues. Problem prevention behaviors can help accomplish this since they are directed towards preventing the reoccurrence of work problems (cf. Frese & Fay, 2001). Specifically, problem prevention behaviors (PPB), a sub-dimension of proactive work behaviors, are focused on identifying the root causes of issues and taking self-directed action aimed at preventing the reoccurrence of work problems (Frese & Fay, 2001; Parker & Collins, 2010; Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006). We examine this dimension because it focuses on rectifying problems that can arise in reaction to unfair events. Taken together, we propose that anxiety can initiate problem prevention behaviors because these behaviors are aimed at addressing the negative situation by reducing the potential threat and its inherent ambiguity as well as reestablishing a sense of control.

*H4: Anxiety is positively associated with problem prevention behaviors.*

### **Examining the Interplay between Unfair Events and Overall Fairness Judgments**

Above, we focused on how individuals experience an unfair event, including their discrete negative emotions and behaviors. However, it is possible that these experiences and

reactions can also have further downstream events. This raises the question of whether individuals' responses to the unfair event can subsequently impact individuals' entity fairness judgments. This is important because previous research has focused "almost exclusively on how fairness perceptions form or exist at one point in time" (cf. Jones & Skarlicki, 2013: 139) and our understanding of how overall fairness judgments evolve over time and as new events are experienced is severely limited (Jones & Skarlicki, 2013; Rupp, 2011). By adopting an event-based perspective that examines fairness experiences *in situ*, our investigation has the potential to shed light on these issues and, in particular, *how* events may impact subsequent judgments. Building on the foundation that emotions can prompt goal-directed behaviors, we argue that engaging in goal-relevant behaviors can provide individuals with information that they can use in future assessments (e.g., entity-based overall fairness judgments).

We propose that engaging in problem prevention behaviors in response to an unfair event can positively impact individuals' subsequent fairness judgments by making the individual feel that they have made goal-related progress and reducing uncertainty about the future. Specifically, problem prevention behaviors are aimed at identifying why problems occurred and taking corrective action to address the situation and prevent problems from reoccurring (Frese, Kring, Soose, & Zempel, 1996). Given that problem prevention behaviors involve taking control of a situation (Parker & Collins, 2010; Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006), these behaviors may help address the unfair event and reestablish a sense of control, thereby positively influencing individuals' expectations about the treatment that they can receive in the future. That is, engaging in problem prevention behaviors in response to an unfair event may change one's circumstances and/or fairness-related expectations. Further, by enhancing individuals' sense of control, problem prevention behaviors address one of the fundamental psychological needs

underlying fairness and provide individuals with reassurance that they will be fairly treated in the future (Cropanzano et al., 2001). We argue that this can enhance subsequent overall fairness judgments because individuals are likely to perceive that they are making progress towards their goal of being fairly treated, which may create positive expectations about future fair treatment. Further, they can draw upon this information when making subsequent appraisals, thereby enhancing their overall fairness judgments.

By contrast, counterproductive work behaviors can signal that the unfair treatment will not be tolerated. However, these behaviors do not necessarily directly address the issue nor do they ensure that fair treatment will occur in the future. Thus, these behaviors seem unlikely to enhance subsequent overall fairness judgments. However, it is possible that these behaviors may detract from overall fairness judgments as people attempt to align their behavior with their evaluations (i.e., negative behaviors are congruent with negative evaluations) or negative expectations (e.g., adjust their judgments to reflect the lowered expectations), and/or rationalize their behaviors (e.g., the entity must have deserved the negative behaviors and is therefore perceived as less just). Thus, we predict that engaging in counterproductive work behaviors can negatively influence subsequent overall fairness judgments. Taken together, we argue that how individuals experience and respond to an unfair event is important for understanding the implications of this event for their entity perceptions.

*H5: In the aftermath of an unfair event, problem prevention behaviors are positively associated with subsequent overall fairness judgments.*

*H6: In the aftermath of an unfair event, counterproductive work behaviors are negatively associated with subsequent overall fairness judgments.*

## METHOD

We conducted a daily diary study with employees of a large public sector organization in the United Kingdom. We selected an event-sampling daily diary approach (cf. Ohly, Sonnentag,

Niessen, & Zapf, 2010), which asks participants to report whether an event has occurred, and if so, they also respond to questions about that event (cf. Beal, 2015; Beal & Weiss, 2003; Ohly et al., 2010). This approach has numerous advantages for our research question, including capturing employees' daily experiences of unfair events in the work context in which they occurred (Ohly et al., 2010), allowing psychological processes to be explored *in situ* (Beal, 2015), and reducing retrospection by having participants report on the event on the same day that it occurred (cf. Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003; Ohly et al., 2010; Robinson & Clore, 2002).

### **Participants and Procedure**

Participants were recruited through a general survey, which included a question asking if they would be willing to be contacted for a daily diary study. No monetary incentives were given but participants were told that they would receive a report with the aggregated findings and that the management team wanted to use these findings to enhance their effectiveness. A total of 291 employees agreed to participate in the diary study (31% response rate). For 10 consecutive working days, participants were emailed a survey link directly from the researchers at the end of each working day. All diary entries were completed online and confidentiality was assured. A total of 2,437 daily entries were recorded (84% response rate for the daily diaries). The sample was 53% male and 92% Caucasian, with an average age of 41 and average tenure of 11 years.

Our research question was concerned with how the presence of an unfair event initiated appraisal processes. To tap into the event-contingent nature of our research question, each diary consisted of daily measures and a question assessing whether an unfair event had occurred on that day. The presence of an unfair event was assessed with one item: "Think about your day at work. Has anything unfair happened today at work, no matter how big or small?" Participants were given two response options: "Yes, something unfair happened today" or "No, nothing



unfair has happened today”. If participants answered “yes”, then the event-specific questions were also presented. This strategy allowed the event and its specifics to be assessed.

### Measures

Given the demands of diary studies on participants, we designed the study with the goal of ensuring that the burden of completion was reasonable, which can enhance compliance (cf. Hektner, Schmidt, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2007). Following Ohly et al.’s (2010) recommendations, we used abbreviated scales to minimize fatigue and frustration – either single-item or shortened scales depending on the construct. We chose single-item scales to assess self-relevant event appraisal, anger, and anxiety since these constructs are considered unidimensional, can have items with high face validity, and have been measured this way in past research (e.g., Davey, Barratt, Butow, & Deeks, 2007; Ekman, Friesen, & Ancoli, 1980; Gross & Levenson, 1993; Larsen, Diener, & Lucas, 2002). To measure overall fairness judgments, problem prevention behaviors, and counterproductive work behaviors, we followed Ohly et al.’s (2010) recommendation to shorten the scales to less than five items per scale. Before proceeding with the full data collection, we piloted our surveys with 10 individuals from the organization who indicated that the survey was appropriate in terms of length (average completion time was approximately 6 minutes) and content. Unless otherwise indicated, we used 4-point Likert-type scales, with anchors ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (to a great extent). The question stem for behaviors was: “To what extent was each of the following true for you today?”

*Self-Relevant Event Appraisal* was measured with one item: “How important is this event to you?” The anchors ranged from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very important).

*Anger and Anxiety* were assessed by asking individuals how the unfair event made them feel (one item each; angry, anxious, respectively).

*Daily Overall Fairness Judgments* were measured with three items ( $\alpha = .84$ ) from Ambrose and Schminke (2009): “Overall, I am treated fairly by my organization”; “In general, the treatment I receive around here is not fair” (reverse-coded); and “For the most part, this organization seems to treat its employees fairly”. Following the specificity matching principle, we measured overall fairness (with an entity-focus) instead of the justice dimensions because it has the same level of specificity as our behavioral outcomes (cf. Colquitt & Shaw, 2005).

*Daily Counterproductive Work Behaviors* were measured with three items from Dalal, Lam, Weiss, Welch, & Hulin’s (2009) six-item scale ( $\alpha = .71$ ). The most relevant items for this context were selected based on the pilot study: “I criticized the organization’s policies”; “I spoke negatively about the organization to others”; and “I did not work to the best of my ability”.

*Daily Problem Prevention Behaviors* were assessed with two items ( $\alpha = .77$ ) from Parker and Collins’ (2010) problem prevention dimension of proactive behaviors: “I tried to find the root cause of things that go wrong”; and “I spent time planning how to prevent reoccurring problems.” We eliminated one item from the original scale because it has a time element that is not relevant on a daily basis (“Try to develop procedures and systems that are effective in the long term, even if they slow things down to begin with”).

*Negative Affectivity* was measured in the general survey with Fortunato and Stone-Romero’s (1999) seven-item measure ( $\alpha = .75$ ; e.g., “If I were given a difficult project to work on, I would worry about it a lot”; “It irritates me more than my friends whenever things don’t go the way they should”). Anchors ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). We examined negative affectivity as a control variable given its potential influence on conceptually relevant endogenous variables (i.e., anxiety, anger, and CWBs; e.g., Berry, Carpenter, & Barratt, 2012; Burke, Brief, & George, 1993).<sup>2</sup>

## RESULTS

Given our event sampling methodology, we examined the frequency of unfair events over the collection period (10 working days). Of the 291 total participants, 168 participants reported experiencing a total of 395 unfair events; 44.6% reported one event, 22.6% reported two events, 13.1% reported three events, and 19.7% reported four or more events (no two events were reported on consecutive days). Participants who did ( $n = 168$ ) versus did not ( $n = 123$ ) report an unfair event did not significantly differ with respect to age, tenure, gender, or negative affectivity. However, participants who reported unfair events (versus those that did not report at least one event) had lower aggregated overall fairness judgments ( $t = -5.81, p < .001$ ) and higher counterproductive work behaviors ( $t = 4.81, p < .001$ ), but did not differ with respect to problem prevention behaviors ( $t = 1.43, p > .10$ ).

We tested our hypotheses with a path model using TYPE=COMPLEX and maximum-likelihood estimation robust (MLR) in MPlus. We chose this analytic strategy because our data did not have sufficient within-person variance to require an analysis that isolates within- versus between-person variance. However, this analysis accounts for dependencies (e.g., people who experienced multiple events) on standard errors (cf. McNeish, Stapleton, & Silverman, 2017).<sup>3</sup> Further, we used measured, rather than latent, variables to ensure that we had an appropriate ratio of observations to parameters for our models (cf. Guadagnoli & Velicer, 1988).

Before testing our hypotheses, we examined the measures for overall fairness judgments, problem prevention behaviors, and counterproductive work behaviors. Using the subset of individuals who had experienced an unfair event, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses (with TYPE=COMPLEX) with uncorrelated measurement errors for our lag, focal day, and lead variables. Our models showed adequate fit (day of event:  $\chi^2 = 38.48, df = 17, p < .001$ ; CFI =

.98; RMSEA = .06; day before event:  $\chi^2 = 41.88$ ,  $df = 17$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .07; day after event:  $\chi^2 = 41.37$ ,  $df = 17$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .07).

Using Vandenberg and Lance's (2000) equivalence tests for repeated measures, we examined configural invariance (i.e., whether the structure of the constructs remained the same across measurement times), and metric invariance (i.e., whether the factor loadings remained comparable across measurement times). Analyses were conducted separately for each of the three latent variables across the time periods (i.e., previous day, day of the unfair event, and next day). All models had an excellent fit and the metric models did not significantly differ from the configural models. The results indicate that the three constructs maintained equivalence across time. Specifically, the results for configural invariance were: overall fairness judgments:  $\chi^2 = 20.46$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $p > .05$ ; CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .03; problem prevention behaviors:  $\chi^2 = 5.41$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p > .05$ ; CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00; counterproductive work behaviors:  $\chi^2 = 12.99$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $p > .05$ ; CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00. The results for metric invariance were: overall fairness judgments:  $\chi^2 = 27.07$ ,  $df = 19$ ,  $p > .05$ ; CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .04;  $\Delta\chi^2 = 6.98$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $p > .05$ ; problem prevention behaviors:  $\chi^2 = 8.37$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p > .05$ ; CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .01;  $\Delta\chi^2 = 4.31$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p > .05$ ; counterproductive work behaviors:  $\chi^2 = 19.49$ ,  $df = 19$ ,  $p > .05$ ; CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .01;  $\Delta\chi^2 = 7.27$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p > .05$  (all  $\chi^2$  differences corrected for MLR).

To test the distinctiveness of our three multi-item constructs (corrected for maximum-likelihood robust; cf. Muthén & Muthén, 2011) for the previous day, same day, and next day measures, we also examined comparative models (e.g., one and two-factor models), all of which had significantly lower fit ( $\chi^2$  differences ranged from 145.99,  $df = 2$  to 3843.78,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .001$ , corrected for MLR, CFIs between .56 and .91, and RMSEAs between .17 and .26). To provide evidence of convergent validity, we calculated the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each

of the three latent constructs, including the previous day, focal day, and next day assessments (i.e., overall fairness judgments, counterproductive work behaviors, and problem prevention behaviors). AVEs ranged from .54 to .74 (which exceeds the recommended threshold of .50) and all AVEs were larger than the squared construct correlations with each other (cf. Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was also established by comparing the AVEs to the Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) and Average Shared Variance (ASV), both of which were lower than the AVEs (differences ranging from .41 to .55). Thus, these analyses support the distinctiveness of our measures.

We examined common method variance by re-testing our model with an unmeasured method factor included (see Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). Specifically, we used a model in which paths are included between the unmeasured method factor and each of the items. Further, given the small number of items to latent constructs, these paths were constrained to be equal and the variance of the methods factor was set to 1 (cf. Podsakoff et al., 2003). Results with the three latent factors (overall fairness judgments, counterproductive work behaviors, and problem prevention behaviors) indicated that this did not significantly increase the model fit ( $\chi^2 = 37.38$ ,  $df = 16$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .07,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 1.32$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p = .25$ , corrected for MLR). We also examined a model which included the three single item measures along with the latent variables. Again the fit did not significantly increase with the unmeasured method factor included (without unmeasured method factor  $\chi^2 = 81.83$ ,  $df = 32$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .06, with unmeasured method factor:  $\chi^2 = 79.07$ ,  $df = 31$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .06,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 1.59$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p = .10$ , corrected for MLR). Taken together, this suggests that common method variance was not a significant issue for our analyses.

We tested for multicollinearity by calculating Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) using all the variables in our model. VIFs above 3 can indicate issues with multicollinearity (cf. O'Brien, 2007). Our VIFs were below this threshold, ranging from 1.02 to 1.30.

### **Hypothesis Testing**

We used an overall model to simultaneously test our hypotheses.<sup>4</sup> The model focused on days when an unfair event was reported and included the previous day (lag) and next day (lead) variables for the dependent variables (overall fairness judgments, problem prevention behaviors, and counterproductive work behaviors). We examined negative affectivity as a control variable for conceptually relevant endogenous variables (see above); however, negative affectivity only significantly predicted anxiety. Thus, we included the significant link between negative affectivity and anxiety in the model but removed the non-significant relationships. We also correlated anxiety and anger to control for their interrelatedness.

Further, we controlled for prior levels of our dependent variables and for the relationships between counterproductive and problem prevention behaviors on overall fairness judgments within a day (for each of the three days). Our model specification was driven by our theoretical rationale. We acknowledge that there are other plausible alternatives to our specification (e.g., attitudes can predict behaviors). However, these alternatives cannot be meaningfully tested with the current design and our goal is not to disentangle the attitude-behavior relationship. Instead, we used this specification because it accounts for the interrelatedness between these constructs within and across days. Further, it allows our examination to focus on how same day behaviors influence next day fairness judgments. That is, it reduces the possibility that the relationships between same day behaviors (problem prevention behaviors and counterproductive work behaviors) and subsequent overall fairness judgments were driven by previous levels of overall

fairness judgments or by the next day levels of behaviors. Although several of these relationships were non-significant, removing these did not change the results or significantly improve the fit ( $\chi^2 = 137.02$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI=.93; RMSEA = .08,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 2.10$ ,  $\Delta df = 2$ ,  $p = .35$ , corrected for MLR). To ease the interpretability of our model and to ensure a precise understanding of these relationships, we included all of the links related to prior levels of dependent variables as well as those pertaining to the relationships between behaviors and overall fairness judgments (within the same day) in the model, regardless of their significance (see Figure 2). Our path model had an acceptable fit ( $\chi^2 = 136.74$ ,  $df = 47$ ,  $p < .01$ ; CFI = .93; RMSEA = .08; see Figure 3). We report the standardized coefficients. Means, standard deviations, and correlations are shown in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 & Figures 2 and 3 about here

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Self-relevant event appraisals were positively related to discrete negative emotions, anger (.42,  $p < .001$ ) and anxiety (.35,  $p < .001$ ), that were targeted towards the event. H1 was supported. Further, pre-existing overall fairness judgments were negatively related to anger in the aftermath of an unfair event (-.15,  $p < .05$ ). H2a was supported. However, pre-existing overall fairness judgments were only marginally related to anxiety in the aftermath of an unfair event (.14,  $p = .08$ ). Although this trended in the hypothesized direction, it did not meet traditional standards for significance. H2b was not supported.

With respect to the relationships between emotions and behaviors, anger related to the unfair event was positively associated with counterproductive work behaviors (.24,  $p < .001$ ) whereas anxiety related to the unfair event was positively associated problem prevention behaviors (.14,  $p < .01$ ). H3 and H4 were both supported. Further, post-hoc analyses indicated

that anxiety did not significantly predict counterproductive work behaviors (.07,  $p = .41$ ) and anger did not significantly predict problem prevention behaviors (-.08,  $p = .11$ ).

Problem prevention behaviors were positively associated with subsequent overall fairness judgments (.13,  $p < .01$ ). H5 was supported. However, counterproductive work behaviors were not significantly related to subsequent overall fairness judgments (-.01,  $p = .89$ ). H6 was not supported. We also tested the pathways (i.e., indirect effects) associated with anxiety and anger. For anxiety, the indirect effects between the self-relevant event appraisal and problem prevention behaviors through anxiety was significant (.05; 95% CI .009, .102) as was the indirect path between anxiety and next day overall justice judgments through problem prevention behaviors (.02; 95% CI .003, .035). For anger, the indirect effects between the self-relevant event appraisal and counterproductive work behaviors through anger was significant (.09; 95% CI .038, .151) but the indirect path between anger and next day overall justice judgments through counterproductive work behaviors was not significant (.00; 95% CI -.018, .015).

We also tested a follow-up model in which the direct effects between the self-relevant event appraisal, anger, and anxiety with next day overall fairness judgments were simultaneously included in the model. Results indicated that self-relevant event appraisals (.00,  $p = .97$ ), anxiety (.01,  $p = .84$ ), and anger (-.01,  $p = .88$ ) did not have significant direct effects on next day overall fairness judgments. Further, the other relationships in the model remained substantially similar and significance levels did not change. Moreover, the fit of this model did not significantly improve by adding the direct links ( $\chi^2 = 135.61$ ,  $df = 44$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .93; RMSEA = .09,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 1.13$ ,  $\Delta df = 3$ ,  $p = .10$ , corrected for MLR).

## DISCUSSION

Although the fairness literature has been dominated by a focus on social exchange



theories and how individuals reciprocate treatment (e.g., Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), we demonstrated that applying appraisal theories can provide novel insights into the influence of emotions and behaviors as well as a more comprehensive understanding of employees' experiences of unfair events. By shifting focus to the employee's perspective and examining unfair events *in situ*, we highlighted the importance of discrete negative emotions in individuals' experiences, how these emotions can guide individuals' reactions to the event (e.g., through behaviors), and the implications of these responses for subsequent overall fairness judgments. Further, this approach provided novel insights related to emotions that have received relatively little attention in the fairness literature (e.g., anxiety) and showcased positive behaviors (e.g., problem prevention behaviors) and outcomes that can emerge in the aftermath of unfair events. We discuss our main findings below.

### **Appraisal Processes in the Aftermath of Unfair Events**

Appraisal theories suggest that individuals are likely to respond to events that hinder the fulfillment of one's goals – that is, events with negative valence (e.g., unfair events) and that are considered self-relevant (Lazarus, 1991). Within the context of fairness, although people may perceive something as unfair, they may not be motivated to respond to the unfair event if it does not make them feel that their goals are being blocked and/or is not perceived as being self-relevant. This suggests that individuals may not be motivated to react to every injustice. Supporting this tenet, our results indicated that people are more likely to experience negative emotions, such as anxiety and anger, to the degree that they perceive the unfair event (i.e., an event with negative valence) to be relevant to the self.

Our findings also indicate that individuals do not encounter events with a “blank slate” (cf. Jones & Skarlicki, 2013). Instead, pre-existing judgments influenced how individuals

experienced unfair events, which highlights the importance of understanding the relationships between entity judgments and unfair events as well as how pre-existing overall fairness perceptions can shape individuals' experiences. Our findings indicated that pre-existing overall fairness judgments were negatively associated with anger, suggesting that positive overall fairness judgments can diminish one's anger about an unfair event. However, pre-existing overall fairness judgments were positively associated with anxiety (marginal significance,  $p = .08$ ). This suggests that unfair events may be experienced as particularly perplexing for individuals who previously felt fairly treated and managers may need to pay particular attention to the uncertainty and ambiguity that is created in the wake of an unfair event. However, as we discuss in more detail below, anxiety can also initiate problem prevention behaviors that can address the unfair event. Thus, some anxiety may not always be negative for the individual or the organization since these can prompt behaviors that may address the unfair situation.

### **The Importance of Discrete Negative Emotions: Anger and Anxiety**

In support of appraisal theory, our findings also highlight the importance of discrete negative emotions for fairness experiences. Although previous research has examined emotions within the context of fairness, the focus has typically been on generalized affect (e.g., Barsky & Kaplan, 2007), negative emotions as a category (e.g., collapsing numerous discrete negative emotions into general category of negative emotions; e.g., Fox et al., 2001), and/or negative emotions that are clearly linked to organizational outcomes (e.g., anger with counterproductive work behaviors and aggression; e.g., Barclay et al., 2005). However, an employee-centered perspective highlights the importance of emotions and suggests that a more nuanced approach to emotions should be adopted (Bies & Tripp, 2002). By applying appraisal theory and shifting our focus to the employee, we re-established the influence of anger and highlighted the importance

of anxiety in the aftermath of unfair events. While anxiety has received little scholarly attention within the context of responses to unfair events, anxiety was related to self-relevant event appraisals and initiated problem prevention behaviors that can help guide responses to the event. These findings suggest that discrete emotions are inherent to the “lived through” experience of injustice and can influence how people behaviorally respond to unfair events. Further, the theoretical distinctions between discrete emotions should be recognized. Discrete negative emotions reflect different appraisals and expected behavioral outcomes (Lazarus, 1991). This suggests that a more comprehensive understanding of the role that emotions play in driving behavior can be accomplished by examining specific discrete emotions.

Our findings highlight the novel insights that can arise when different theoretical approaches and assumptions are adopted. Social exchange theories and manager-centered perspectives emphasize reciprocation and outcomes that are important to the manager and/or organization. However, this focus may not reflect employees’ experiences and the significance of experiencing different emotions. By contrast, appraisal theories highlight the importance of emotions in response to an event and understanding their differential effects. Thus, scholars should investigate emotions that are reflective of employees’ experiences and not simply those that are immediately or obviously related to a managerial or organizational perspective and interests. Although it is important to recognize that anger can have negative consequences for the organization, understanding the influence of other discrete negative emotions (e.g., anxiety) can enhance our ability to effectively support employees and manage unfair experiences.

### **Discrete Negative Emotions and the Elicitation of Behaviors**

Although examining specific discrete emotions is critical to enhance our understanding of employees’ emotional experiences, it is also important because discrete negative emotions can

differentially predict outcomes. Using an employee perspective, we argued that anxiety can prompt problem prevention behaviors aimed at identifying and preventing problems (Frese & Fay, 2001), whereas anger can elicit counterproductive work behaviors which signal that the unfair treatment is not acceptable and will not be tolerated (Tripp & Bies, 1997). Our results supported these proposed relationships and highlighted intricacies related to the perspective (employee versus manager) that is adopted.

While appraisal theories predict that problem prevention behaviors should emerge in the wake of unfair events, this contrasts the notion of reciprocation underlying social exchange perspectives. From a social exchange perspective, proactive behaviors (a broader category in which problem prevention behaviors are a sub-dimension) have been found to *increase* to the degree that individuals feel *fairly* treated because individuals should be motivated to reciprocate treatment (e.g., Fischer & Smith, 2006). Given this apparent contrast, it is important to reconcile these differences. We suggest that these differences emerge because the underlying theoretical perspectives differ in their focus and motivations for behaviors. Whereas social exchange theory focuses on balancing the relationship through reciprocity, appraisal theories focus on individuals' goal fulfillment. We discuss these differences in more detail below.

Our findings suggest that social exchange and appraisal theories shed light on different aspects of employees' experiences. From a social exchange perspective, individuals reciprocate fair treatment on an ongoing basis, responding to fair treatment with positive behaviors (cf. Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Follow-up analyses supported this tenet; previous day overall fairness judgments positively predicted problem prevention behaviors (.19,  $p < .001$ ). However, social exchange theories suggest that individuals should rescind positive behaviors (e.g., problem prevention behaviors) when negative treatment (e.g., an unfair event) is experienced. By

contrast, our results indicated that problem prevention behaviors *increase* in the aftermath of an unfair event. This is consistent with an appraisal perspective in which problem prevention behaviors are important in the immediate aftermath of an unfair event as individuals experience discrete negative emotions and attempt to address the situation. That is, problem prevention behaviors can also be elicited by anxiety and used to facilitate goal fulfillment (i.e., these behaviors may not be limited to addressing the imbalance in one's relationship with a manager or organization but can be functional for the individual). Further, an appraisal perspective suggests that these behaviors may become less important in the long term as individuals move on from the event, find other ways of coping, or resolve the issue. That is, problem prevention behaviors are important in the immediate aftermath of an unfair event but may hold less importance as the event is addressed and/or as discrete negative emotions dissipate.

Taken together, individuals may reciprocate their treatment on an ongoing basis and engage in problem prevention behaviors in response to ongoing fair treatment. However, they may also use problem prevention behaviors to address anxiety caused by an unfair event. This suggests that problem prevention behaviors may be differentially motivated and take on added importance in the aftermath of an unfair event. Further, it implies that it is critical to understand (a) why a behavior is occurring to understand its effects, (b) how unfair events can initiate processes that parallel, complement, and disrupt other processes (e.g., reciprocity), and (c) how processes may differ on a daily versus ongoing basis. Further, our finding that the anxiety experienced in the aftermath of an unfair event positively predicted problem prevention behaviors may be a result of measuring this outcome on the same day that an event occurred – this effect might not have been observed if problem prevention behaviors had been measured at a later time (e.g., a week or month after the event). Thus, time of measurement may also be an

important consideration, which also highlights the importance of examining relationships at different time periods as well as the utility of experience sampling methods (cf. Beal, 2015).

Although both appraisal and social exchange theories suggest that anger should elicit counterproductive work behaviors, the underlying rationale is different. Whereas a social exchange perspective suggests that anger should prompt counterproductive work behaviors because individuals are motivated to reciprocate unfair treatment with “bad” behaviors, appraisal theories suggest that counterproductive work behaviors are “good” behaviors for the individual. That is, these behaviors are functional for the individual because these behaviors signal that unfair treatment will not be tolerated (Tripp & Bies, 1997). This suggests that it is important for future research to delve deeper into the motivations and psychological processes underlying these behaviors. Further, viewing counterproductive work behaviors as “bad” can obscure the functional implications of these behaviors for employees (Bies & Tripp, 1998, 2005). This suggests that behaviors should not be viewed as necessarily “good” or “bad” but rather their functions and interpretations of these behaviors may differ depending on the perspective that is adopted (cf. Cropanzano et al., 2017). Taken together, expanding our focus beyond emotions that are relevant from a manager-centered perspective (e.g., anger) to include emotions that are important from an employee perspective (e.g., anxiety) can also enhance our understanding of the behaviors that are likely to emerge in the aftermath of unfair events (e.g., problem prevention behaviors). Further, it is important to acknowledge that the same behaviors may be viewed quite differently depending on the perspective that is being adopted.

### **The Interplay between Unfair Events and Overall Fairness Judgments**

By adopting an event-based perspective that examines fairness experiences *in situ*, our research also provides insights into how unfair events can influence entity judgments. Generally

speaking, our results indicate that entity judgments may be influenced by how individuals respond to an unfair event (i.e., individuals' reactions to an unfair event can inform their judgments). However, the relationships were different for problem prevention behaviors and counterproductive work behaviors. We discuss these differences below.

Our results indicated that problem prevention behaviors were positively associated with subsequent overall fairness judgments. This challenges a strong assumption in the literature that the relationship between fairness and behaviors is unidirectional (for exceptions, see Moorman, Niehoff, & Organ, 1993; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1993). This finding is important for several reasons. First, this indicates that behaviors can impact *subsequent* overall fairness judgments. Problem prevention behaviors involve taking control of a situation (Parker & Collins, 2010; Parker et al., 2006). As such, these behaviors may help address the unfair event and reestablish a sense of control, thereby positively influencing individuals' expectations about future treatment. That is, engaging in problem prevention behaviors in response to an unfair event may change one's circumstances and/or fairness-related expectations. Further, the multiple needs model of justice suggests that the psychological need for control underlies fairness judgments (cf. Cropanzano et al., 2001). Thus, by enhancing individuals' sense of control, problem prevention behaviors may provide individuals with reassurance that they will be fairly treated in the future. Future research should further explore the mechanisms underlying this effect.

Second, the positive relationship between problem prevention behavior and next day overall fairness judgments also implies that *constructive* behaviors towards the organization can emerge in the wake of an unfair event. Whereas past research has indicated that individuals are likely to respond negatively towards the organization (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2013), unfair events can also have positive consequences by helping the individual and organization move forward in

a constructive manner (e.g., by fixing the issues at hand). Further, this finding can temper the potentially negative implications for the relationship between pre-existing overall fairness judgments and anxiety. Although positive overall fairness judgments may have negative implications for the individual by increasing anxiety in response to an unfair event, this anxiety may also have functional outcomes; anxiety can enhance problem prevention behaviors thereby enabling the individual to make positive changes in the environment. Future research should explore how individuals and organizations can create positive outcomes from unfair experiences.

In contrast to the results for problem prevention behaviors, our analyses did not indicate a significant relationship between counterproductive work behaviors and subsequent overall fairness judgments. It is possible that behaviors have a stronger influence on subsequent overall fairness judgments when the behavior directly addresses the concern raised by the unfair event. In this case, problem prevention behaviors are likely best suited for addressing the problem. If so, then other behaviors should be less likely to influence subsequent overall fairness judgments. For example, counterproductive work behaviors may signal that unfair treatment will not be tolerated but they do not directly address the issue. Similarly, extra-role citizenship behaviors are focused on reciprocation rather than addressing the situation (e.g., Rupp et al., 2014) whereas helping coworkers may facilitate coping (e.g., by alleviating and/or validating their negative emotions; Barclay & Kiefer, 2014; Grant & Wade-Benzoni, 2009) but is unlikely to address the situation. Thus, it is possible that behavior specificity is needed to positively influence subsequent overall fairness judgments (i.e., the behavior must address and/or correct the relevant concern to enhance subsequent judgments).<sup>4</sup>

Although behavior specificity is one possible explanation, we conducted follow-up analyses to further examine these relationships. Specifically, we re-examined the relationship



between counterproductive work behaviors (measured on the day of the unfair event) with subsequent overall fairness judgments (measured the day after the event). Whereas our original analyses controlled for same day overall fairness judgments (to ensure that the relationship was being driven by the behavior and not the overall fairness judgment), this time we did not control for same-day overall fairness judgments. In other words, instead of focusing on the change in overall fairness judgments from same day to next day, this supplemental analysis simply focused on whether counterproductive work behaviors influenced subsequent overall fairness judgments without controlling for same day overall fairness judgments. This analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between counterproductive work behaviors and next day overall fairness judgments ( $-.11, p < .05$ ), while all other results remain unchanged.

It is important to take a step back to understand these results. Counterproductive work behaviors were only significantly associated with next day overall fairness judgments when same day overall fairness judgments were not controlled. This suggests that counterproductive work behaviors are associated with lower overall fairness judgments as individuals adjust their judgments to reflect their experiences but these behaviors do not continue to detract from these judgments into the next day (i.e., the judgments remain at the lower level but do not continue to decrease). Thus, engaging in counterproductive work behaviors may be functional for the individual by curtailing a continued drop in overall fairness judgments but engaging in these behaviors is unlikely to enhance or restore overall fairness judgments. Taking these results together with the findings for problem prevention behaviors suggests that behaviors may not only have different functions but that their effects (and the lasting nature of these effects) may also vary. Future research should explore when, why, and how behaviors can influence fairness judgments as well as the pervasiveness of these effects.

Additionally, it may be helpful to explore how engaging in certain behaviors can influence other outcomes. For example, counterproductive work behaviors may facilitate catharsis (e.g., release negative energy and diminish rumination) or allow individuals to believe that they have “restored justice” (Bies & Tripp, 1998; 2002). Thus, these behaviors may prompt feelings of psychological resolution, which may be associated with fewer stress reactions and allow the individual to move on from the event (e.g., forgive; Barclay & Saldanha, 2016). Alternatively, counterproductive work behaviors may induce guilt, which may motivate individuals to put the event behind them so that they do not ruminate about having engaged in a “negative” behavior. Clearly, further research is needed to understand how individuals’ behaviors can influence not only themselves but also how the event unfolds over time.<sup>5</sup>

Although we suggested that unfair events are likely to inform subsequent entity judgments via behaviors, this raises the question of whether other components of the unfair experience can directly influence subsequent overall fairness judgments. As noted in the results section, follow-up analyses indicated that self-relevant event appraisals, anxiety, and anger did not directly predict next day overall fairness judgments. On the surface, it may seem counterintuitive that unfair events can enhance overall fairness judgments. However, these findings highlight the importance of examining the processes underlying unfair events (especially the resulting behaviors) since it is through the emergence of these processes that overall fairness judgments can be impacted. This also raises the question of what happens when individuals are not able to act in accordance with their emotions (e.g., when people experiencing anger cannot engage in counterproductive work behaviors or when people experiencing anxiety cannot engage in problem prevention behaviors). Future research should examine these effects and their influence on overall fairness judgments and the emergence of other outcomes.

**Putting It All Together: Two Distinct Emotional Pathways**

Our findings indicated that it is not only important to understand the implications of emotions within the context of unfair events but also how the differential effects of these emotions can create distinct pathways that can have significant consequences for the individual. Our results for anger and anxiety are consistent with the core relational themes and pathways described by appraisal theories (cf. Lazarus, 1991). Whereas anxiety elicited problem prevention behaviors that can positively influence subsequent overall fairness judgments, anger prompted counterproductive work behaviors. However, the relationship between counterproductive work behaviors and subsequent overall fairness judgments was only significant when same day overall fairness judgments were not controlled. This suggests that emotions can elicit disparate behaviors, which can have differential effects on overall fairness judgments. These findings are important for several reasons. First, studying discrete negative emotions (as opposed to generalized affect or categories of emotions) allows these distinctions to be recognized and provides a more nuanced understanding of the role of emotions. Second, previous research has often emphasized anger when examining discrete negative emotions because it predicts outcomes of relevance to organizations (cf. Bies & Tripp, 2002; Cropanzano et al., 2017). However, our findings indicate that it is important to understand these experiences from the employee's perspective and with outcomes of relevance to them. Thus, it is important to further identify and investigate the emotions that characterize fairness-related experiences to understand their implications for individuals and organizations. Finally, discrete negative emotions can differentially influence behaviors and subsequent cognitions, which may impact how individuals experience subsequent events. Taken together, discrete negative emotions are important in their own right and also because they initiate pathways that can have significant consequences for the

individual, the organization, and how fairness can be effectively managed.

### **LIMITATIONS, STRENGTHS, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

By using a daily diary methodology with event sampling, we captured real-life everyday unfair events in the context in which they occurred. We focused on self-relevant event appraisals. However, future research may wish to explore how the specific details of the event (e.g., what dimension of justice was violated) can influence these processes. Further, although our measure of self-relevant event appraisals captured the importance of the event to the individual and the presence of emotions indicated that individuals felt that the event was personally relevant, one's experiences and reactions may differ depending on whether the event personally happened to them, whether they were alone or with others, or whether they were a third party witnessing the event. Future research should examine these possibilities.

We used one-item and shortened measures to reduce fatigue and frustration as well as enhance compliance, which is particularly important when participants are asked to complete multiple assessments (Hektner et al., 2007; Ohly et al., 2010). One of the concerns with using single-item measures is that they can lack content validity when they are assessing multi-faceted constructs. Thus, we limited our use of single-item measures to unidimensional constructs and used shortened scales for multi-faceted constructs. Nonetheless, future research may wish to examine these relationships with multi-item and/or full-version scales.

Given our focus on overall fairness judgments, emotions, and subtle behaviors that are not easily observed by others, our measures were completed by the same focal person. Accordingly, we proactively considered and made extensive efforts to curtail potential issues related to common method bias. Specifically, we incorporated numerous strategies that can minimize this issue in our study design, including assuring confidentiality, randomizing items

within question blocks, separating our predictor and criterion variables in the surveys, and using previous/next day variables rather than same day variables for the analysis, when possible (see Conway & Lance, 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Further, our supplemental analyses (see results section) indicated that common method bias had minimal, if any, impact on our results.

Our research question focused on anxiety and anger. However, future research should examine the influence of other discrete negative emotions that can arise in reaction to unfair events (e.g., disgust, Skarlicki, Hoegg, Aquino, & Nadisic, 2013; envy, Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007) as well as how these processes can be influenced by contextual variables and other psychological processes (e.g., counterfactual thinking; Folger & Cropanzano, 2001).

### **Practical Implications**

There are a number of important practical implications that emerge from our findings. First, unfair events can arise and impact individuals on an everyday basis, which implies that fairness should be managed on an ongoing and *daily* basis, not just in the presence of major organizational events (e.g., layoffs, major organizational change). Second, although ensuring that employees are treated fairly is associated with a plethora of important outcomes (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2013; Rupp et al., 2014), positive overall fairness judgments are not a panacea. Unfair events may be particularly anxiety-producing for individuals who generally believe that they are fairly treated. Thus, managers need to be cognizant of the implications of anxiety and also devote attention towards managing uncertainty and ambiguity when unfair events arise.

Third, despite the common assumptions that employees are passive recipients of fairness (cf. Barclay & Skarlicki, 2008) and/or “blank slates” (cf. Jones & Skarlicki, 2013), our results indicate that their prior judgments can influence how they experience unfair events. Further, their own behaviors can influence subsequent overall fairness judgments. Managers should be aware

that the same event can be experienced and reacted to differently, depending on one's prior judgments as well as the type of emotions and behaviors that are involved. Fourth, engaging in problem prevention behaviors in the wake of an unfair event can have positive implications for overall fairness judgments. Managers can facilitate these behaviors in numerous ways (e.g., by establishing norms and rewards systems that support these behaviors; cf. Grant, Parker, & Collins, 2009). Organizations may find it fruitful to encourage these behaviors not only because these behaviors can support efforts to make positive changes and promote creativity, but also because these behaviors may diminish the negative effects of experiencing unfairness.

By examining experiences from an employee-perspective, our research highlights the processes underlying how individuals experience and respond to unfair events on an everyday basis and *in situ*. Further, it provides a more comprehensive understanding of employees' emotional and behavioral reactions, challenges assumptions in the literature, and highlights new insights that can be derived when unfair events are viewed through the lens of appraisal theories. We encourage fairness researchers to continue to explore "lived through" and *in situ* experiences of fairness using different theoretical frameworks and through the perspective of the employee – doing so, can raise important theoretical questions, uncover assumptions in the field, and create new research avenues that can enhance our understanding. Practically, it can also ensure that the literature remains compelling to those who are faced with and must manage fairness issues on an everyday basis (cf. Shapiro, 2001).

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### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Although overall fairness judgments can be event-based (e.g., in general, how fair was this event; Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001), we focus on entity-based overall fairness judgments given the nature of our research question. From this point forward, we use the term overall fairness judgment to reflect a general entity-based evaluation.

<sup>2</sup> We also assessed other potential control variables related to the individual (e.g., gender, age, tenure, managerial level) and the diary completion (e.g., time of day, day of week, number of diaries completed, number of unfair events experienced). None of these were significantly related to our core variables. Thus, we conducted our analyses without these variables for two reasons. First, we did not have theoretical justification for their inclusion. Second, including control variables that are unrelated to other substantive variables can yield biased estimates, reduce power, and introduce complications that can change the meaning of the relationships between variables (for discussions, see Becker 2005; Edwards, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> We examined the amount of within- and between-person variance in our dependent variables using intra-class correlations (ICCs). Multi-level analysis is only recommended when design effects exceed a threshold of 2 (defined as  $1 + (\text{average cluster size} - 1) * \text{intra-class correlation}$ ; cf. Maas & Hox, 2005; Muthén & Satorra, 1995). Our data did not meet these thresholds (i.e., design effects ranged from 1.48 to 1.53), indicating that a general analysis was more appropriate. We chose TYPE=COMPLEX to take into account the nesting in our data (i.e., individuals who had experienced multiple events; McNeish et al., 2017).

<sup>4,5</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.



**Table 1**  
**Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations**

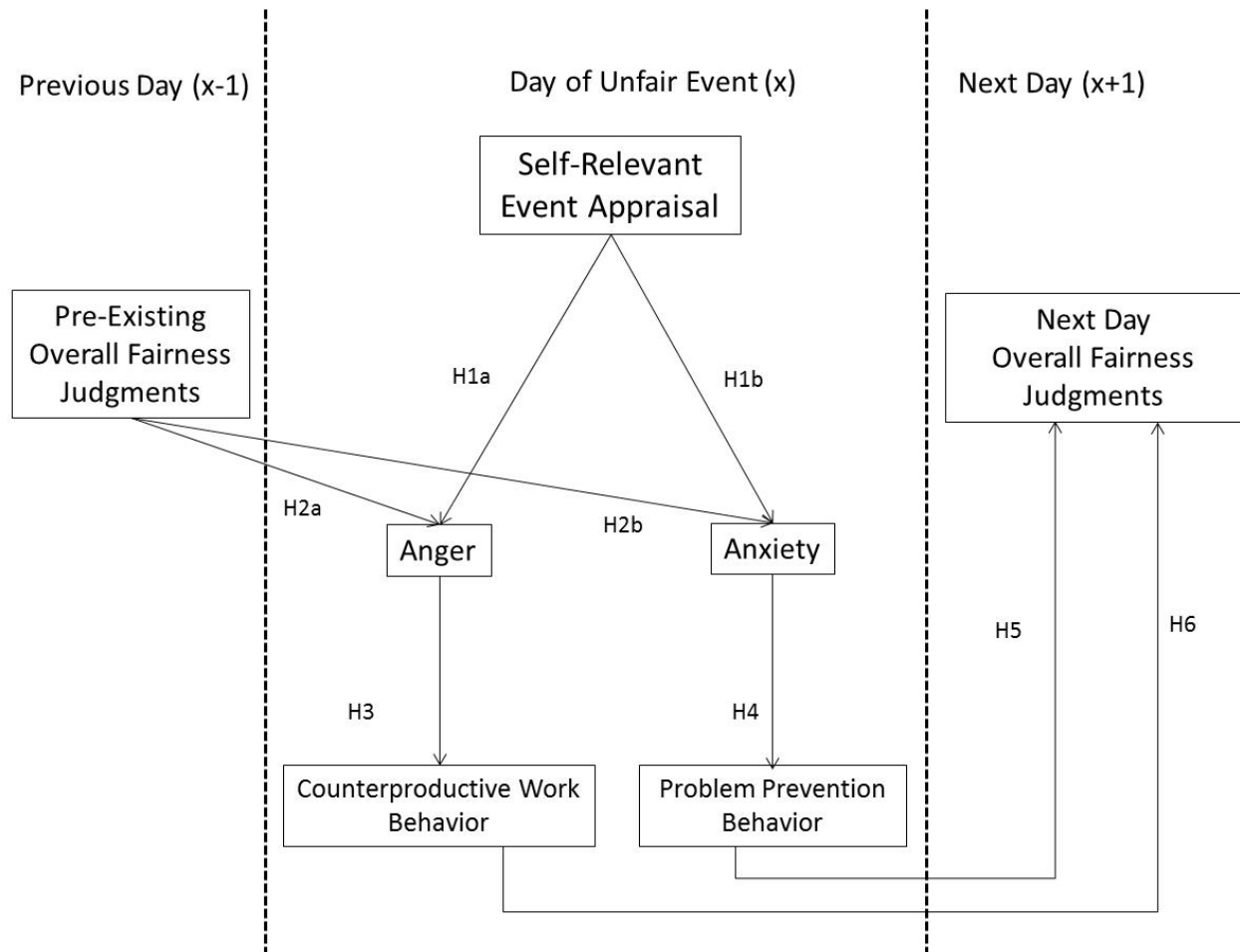
Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Self-Relevant Event Appraisal	3.11	0.96												
2. Anger	2.66	1.08	.43**											
3. Anxiety	2.02	1.04	.36**	.26**										
4. Overall Fairness	2.49	0.85	-.15*	-.21**	-.07									
5. Overall Fairness (Previous Day)	2.68	0.86	-.15*	-.17*	.05	.74**								
6. Overall Fairness (Next Day)	2.62	0.84	-.18*	-.22**	.00	.78**	.77**							
7. CWBs	1.99	0.84	.31**	.30**	.18*	-.40**	-.29**	-.34**						
8. CWBs (Previous Day)	1.73	0.77	.12	.11	.11	-.28**	-.40**	-.26**	.45**					
9. CWBs (Next Day)	1.79	0.73	.27**	.19*	.21**	-.30**	-.31**	-.35**	.49**	.47**				
10. PPBs	2.13	0.99	.13*	-.04	.30**	.20*	.29**	.30**	.10	.04	.13*			
11. PPBs (Previous Day)	2.13	1.03	.15*	-.03	.35**	.21*	.25**	.25**	.02	.05	.17**	.64**		
12. PPBs (Next Day)	2.04	1.01	.18*	-.06	.34**	.26**	.35**	.30**	.02	-.05	.13*	.64**	.70**	
13. Trait NA	2.83	0.74	.03	.08	.19**	-.05	-.04	-.02	.05	.05	.01	.05	.06	.03

*Notes.*

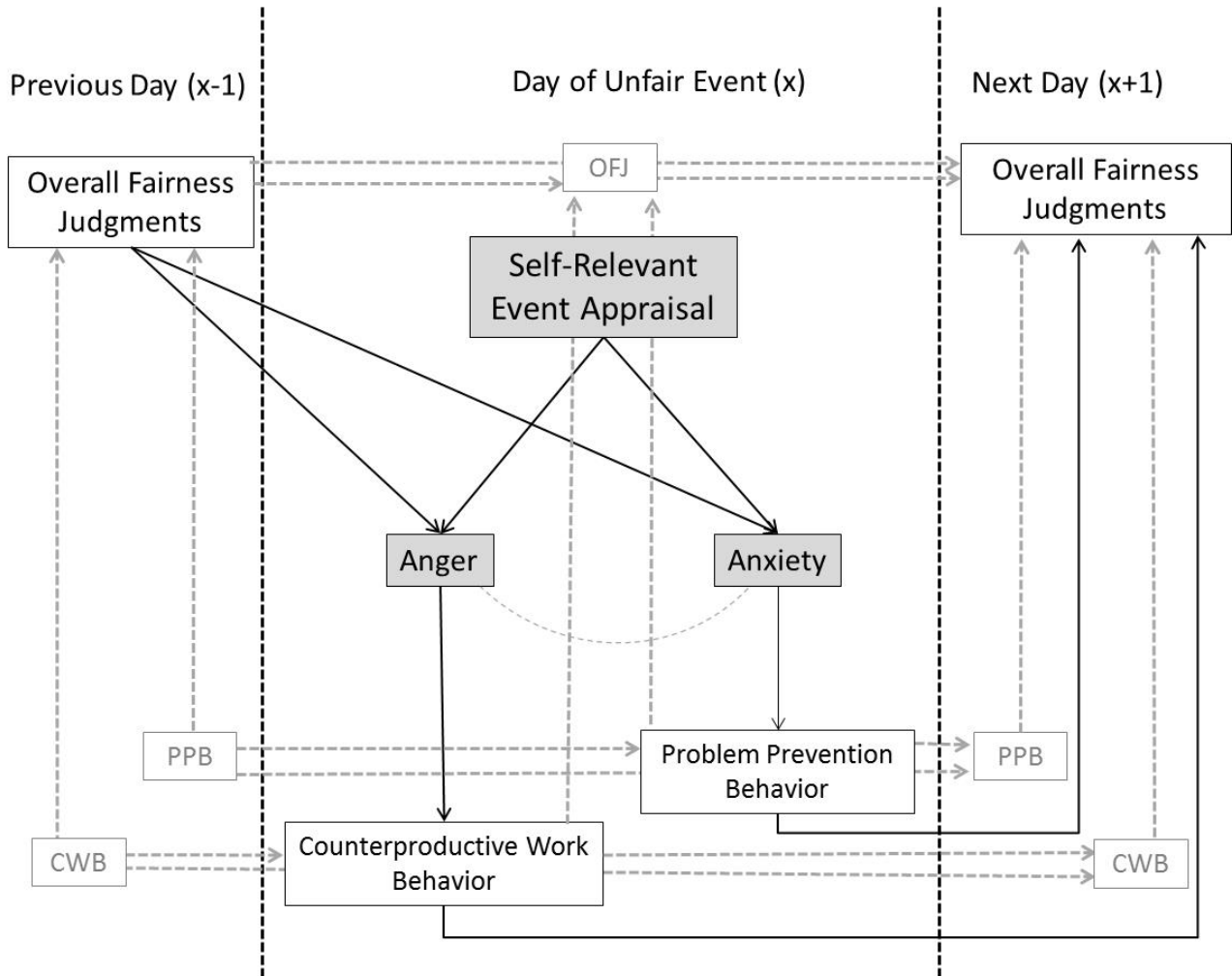
\*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$ . CWBs = counterproductive work behaviors; PPBs = problem prevention behaviors; NA = negative affectivity.

The correlation table is based on the daily entries across individuals, with the exception of NA which was measured in a general pre-diary survey.

**Figure 1**  
**Theoretical Model and Hypotheses**

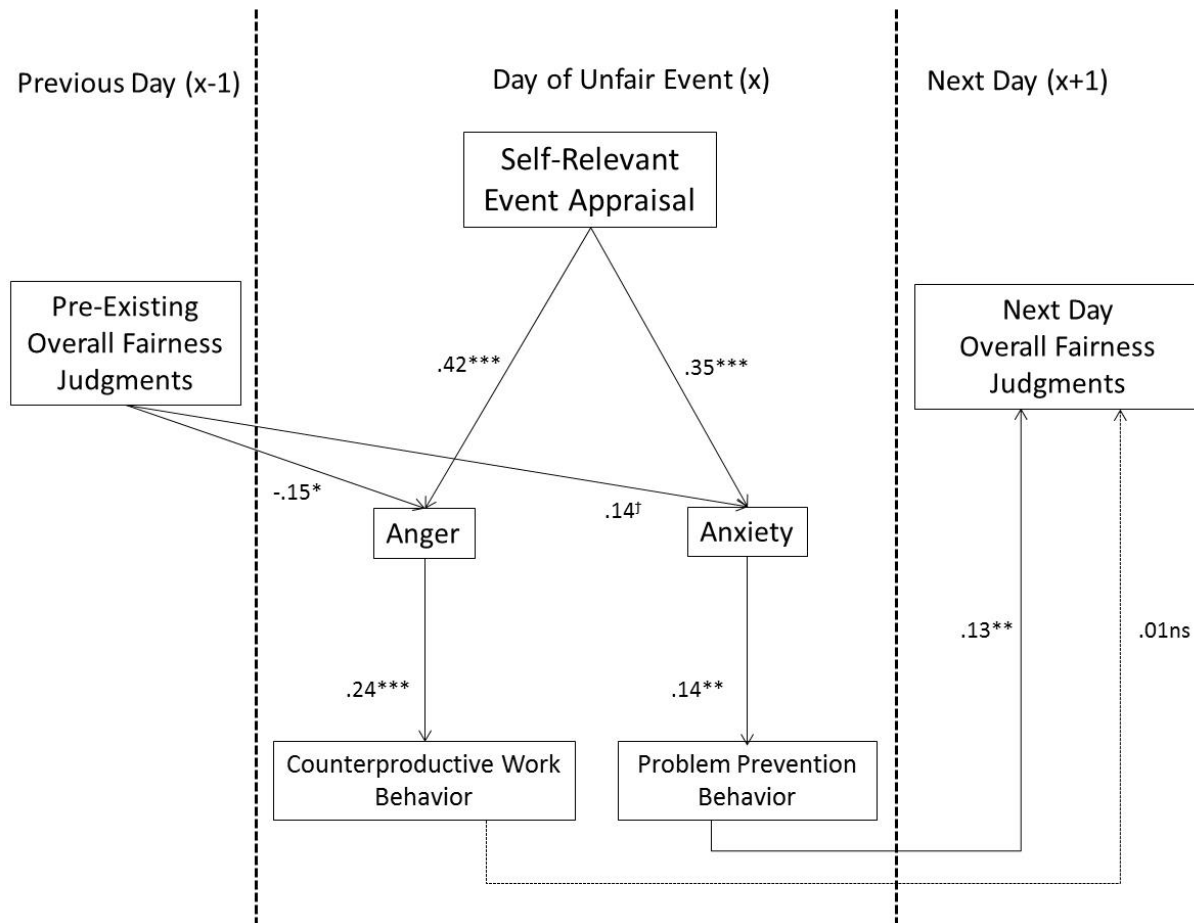


**Figure 2**  
**Measurement Model <sup>a</sup>**



<sup>a</sup> CWB = counterproductive work behavior; OFJ = overall fairness judgment; PPB = problem prevention behavior.

Shaded boxes represent event-specific variables. Paths represented in solid black reflect structural paths of primary interest; paths in grey with dashes reflect control paths; paths in grey with rounded lines reflect correlations; the path between trait negative affectivity and anxiety has been omitted for ease of presentation (each of these points is discussed in further detail in the hypothesis testing section where the analytic strategy is outlined).

**Figure 3****Results<sup>a</sup>**

Notes.

<sup>†</sup>  $p = .08$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; ns = non-significant.

<sup>a</sup> For ease of presentation, the figure does not display our control variable (negative affectivity) or our control paths (e.g., which are used to statistically control for relationships between behaviors and overall fairness on the same day and to account for prior levels of our dependent variables; see Figure 2 and discussion in hypothesis testing section for an explanation of these links and their inclusion in the model).